

Aesthetic Responses to the Industrial Revolution

Picturing America

Introduction:

This lesson plan is designed for a study of romanticism in classes of high school American literature and humanities and could easily be adapted for U.S. history, American studies, and art history; it could equally as well be altered for use in middle school. Romanticism as a literary and artistic movement was, in part, a response to industrialism in the United States, to the use of people as extensions of machines, and to altering relationships between humans and nature. This lesson should follow an introduction to the Industrial Revolution and the ways it altered American life, and then focus on responses to the shifting American landscape by artists of the Hudson River School and writers of the Transcendental movement.

Learning Objectives: *Students will understand that...*

- ...the Industrial Revolution made a dramatic impact on American life as large numbers of people moved from farms to cities to find ways of making a sufficient living
- ...artists and writers responded to these changes by creating works that called into question the direction in which America was headed and the very purpose of life itself
- ...these art forms are a way of questioning the values and beliefs of the Industrial Age

Guiding Question: How did Thomas Cole and the Transcendentalist writers respond to the changes brought by the Industrial Revolution?

The Hudson River School: Thomas Cole Reflects upon the American Landscape

Text: Thomas Cole's *The Oxbow* (1836) (Mount Holyoke, Northampton, Massachusetts)
(1836 was the same year Emerson completed "Nature.")

Directions: Display the poster of *The Oxbow*. Encourage student inspection of the painting and lead a discussion based on the questions provided. After the discussion, provide background on the Hudson River School and its characteristics as an art movement.

Classroom discussion:

1. At first inspection, what do you think this painting is about?
2. Look more closely. What do you see?
3. List differences you notice between the left and right sides of the painting.
4. This painting was completed in the midst of the Industrial Revolution. What question might Cole be raising about the direction of America at this time? Does he seem to take a side? Support your view.
5. Form a conclusion about what Cole was saying about man's relationship with nature. What was he saying about the growth of industry in the United States?

Transcendentalism: Emerson and Thoreau Reflect upon Nature and the Industrial Revolution

Texts: Chapter 1 from Emerson's "Nature" and "Why I Went to the Woods" from Thoreau's *Walden*

Class Discussion: To help students understand the conflict between nature and the industrial revolution that Americans were experiencing, lead a discussion on the intended meanings of these authors. This could be done as a whole-class activity, or the teacher could opt for most of the discussion in small groups and then make a transition to a whole class discussion.

Some Questions for Discussion:

1. What words do the authors choose to use that show their point of view toward nature and the industrial revolution? What inferences can you draw from these words?
2. What similarities and differences do you detect between the two writers?
3. Evaluate the following statements:
 - Thoreau and Emerson do not look realistically at the natural changes that transpire in human life.
 - Americans, then and now, should have embraced the views of Thoreau and Emerson

- “Thoreau and Emerson are a bit too self-righteous for my blood.”
4. To what extent did Americans of mid-19th Century embrace the ideas of Emerson and Thoreau? In what ways did they reject their views?
 5. Can you see any influences that Thoreau and Emerson had on America in the 20th Century?
 6. What do Emerson and Thoreau have to say to Americans of the 21st Century?

Performance Task/Assessment: An Essay on the Industrial Revolution & Nature

Write a well-developed essay in which you discuss ways in which the Industrial Revolution caused a shift in the relationships between humans and nature. Then, analyze how this Revolution influenced both art and literature by discussing Thomas Cole’s painting and the selections from Emerson and Thoreau. Finally, conclude with a brief discussion about your own view of nature and to what extent you feel it has been influenced by industrialism or by romantic views or by a combination of both.

Vocabulary (from Wikipedia)

Hudson River School – a mid-19th century American art movement embodied by a group of landscape painters whose aesthetic vision was influenced by romanticism. The paintings for which the movement is named depict the Hudson River Valley and the surrounding area, including the Catskill, Adirondack, and the White Mountains; eventually works by the second generation of artists associated with the school expanded to include other locales.

Industrial Revolution – a period from the 18th to the 19th century where major changes in agriculture, manufacturing, mining, and transport had a profound effect on the socioeconomic and cultural conditions starting in the United Kingdom, then subsequently spreading throughout Europe, North America, and eventually the world. The onset of the Industrial Revolution marked a major turning point in human history; almost every aspect of daily life was eventually influenced in some way.

Transcendentalism – a group of new ideas in literature, religion, culture, and philosophy that emerged in New England in the early to middle 19th century. It is sometimes called **American transcendentalism** to distinguish it from other uses of the word *transcendental*. Transcendentalism began as a protest against the general state of culture and society, and in particular, the state of intellectualism at Harvard and the doctrine of the Unitarian church taught at Harvard Divinity School. Among transcendentalists' core beliefs was an ideal spiritual state that 'transcends' the physical and empirical and is only realized through the individual's intuition, rather than through the doctrines of established religions. Prominent transcendentalists included Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau.

Romanticism – a complex artistic, literary, and intellectual movement that originated in the second half of the 18th century in Western Europe, and gained strength in reaction to the Industrial Revolution. In part, it was a revolt against aristocratic social and political norms of the Age of Enlightenment and a reaction against the scientific rationalization of nature, and was embodied most strongly in the visual arts, music, and literature, but had a major impact on historiography, education, and natural history.

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